

SOVIET EXPANSION INTO THE MIDDLE EAST

Needed: A Post-Geneva Containment Strategy

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WHEN the Geneva Conference ended last July in a glow of harmony and mutual satisfaction, cynical observers were heard to comment that now that the menace of world war had been banished, the "little wars" between the powers could commence. The backlog of unresolved conflicts at that time included the interminable struggle between India and Pakistan over control of Kashmir; continuous border warfare between Egypt and Israel; tension between France and the Arab League over North Africa; and a noisy squabble between India and Portugal over Goa. It was a safe guess that by the autumn things would get hot in at least one of these areas, but no one seriously thought of including the Eastern Mediterranean—let alone did anyone consider it likely that a Greco-Turkish clash over Cyprus might come close to wrecking the southern end of the NATO system, or that Colonel Nasser would take the Egyptian army halfway behind the Iron Curtain. Yet both these events have occurred since September, while to all intents the great powers are further than ever from settling their main differences. Is the public then to understand that coexistence with Russia will have to be practiced against a background of rapid political disintegration on the Western side, while the

With Egypt's suddenly announced decision to buy arms from Czechoslovakia and the USSR, the Kremlin has succeeded in extending its influence directly into the Middle East—this coming after Soviet successes in the Balkans and the Mediterranean area. Is the price, then, of Geneva the expansion of Soviet influence, GEORGE LICHTHEIM asks, or can the West devise a new, post-Geneva containment strategy? Mr. Lichtheim is one of our regular contributors; his "Changing Alignments in the Middle East" appeared last month.

East conserves the advantages inherent in the centralized system inherited by Stalin's successors?

IT SEEMS reasonable to suppose that this is indeed what the Kremlin had in mind when it signified its willingness to negotiate a *détente*. It is certainly not what was intended on the Western side, but events have shaped themselves this way, and it is interesting to study the effect Geneva has had on this process. In saying this one ought not to credit the Soviet government with the ability to foresee all the consequences that have flowed from the Four Power conference last summer; it is conceivable that some of them have come as a surprise to the Russians no less than to the West. But insofar as the general effect of Geneva has been to re-admit the USSR to the traditional game of power politics in Europe and the Middle East, it must have been obvious to the Soviet policy-makers that penetration in some key areas would become easier. In this respect there can have been no dispute between Molotov—now apparently under fire from the party secretariat for reasons not yet disclosed—and his colleague Suslov, who is in charge of the Cominform and ideological warfare generally. Molotov's days in office may be numbered, and the Cominform may eventually be dissolved in deference to Yugoslav wishes, but the general line is unlikely to be changed. Why should it be? Everything that has happened since Geneva suggests that the post-Stalin policy of greater flexibility in relation to other powers is paying dividends.

It is likewise apparent that the principal fields of Soviet expansion for the time being are the Balkans and the Middle East. It must have cost Stalin's successors some sacrifice of

pride to let Peking take over the major responsibility for Asia (except in India, whose Communist party apparently retains an independent pipeline to Moscow), but having accepted the principle of a near-equal partnership, they are evidently trying to make it work. Again, in dealing with their chosen field of expansion, they have gone some distance to meet criticism of Stalin's characteristic manner of treating satellites and potential allies. The recent ideological demotion of Molotov—apart from disclosing a remarkable degree of indifference to the October Foreign Ministers' conference announced with such fanfare in the summer—is chiefly significant for its continued devaluation of the Stalinist legacy. The Yugoslav Communists and other heretics are to have further assurances that there will be no return to the old system of rigid control from an infallible center. Behind the political drama of the Khrushchev-Bulganin visit to Belgrade last spring, and the more recent Mikoyan mission, there lay a return to the traditional pre-revolutionary Balkan tug-of-war between East and West (in those days symbolized by Petersburg and Vienna). This suits Belgrade to perfection, for it is the essence of the Titoist position that East and West should tacitly agree to a live-and-let-live policy from which the smaller powers can benefit. Without knowing what either Mikoyan or Robert Murphy had to say to Marshal Tito during their almost simultaneous visits to his country, one may be sure that each encountered the same Yugoslav readiness to profit from the rivalry between East and West. British observers in Belgrade seem certain that Tito is determined never again to become an economic satellite of Russia. But Moscow is willing to bid high to achieve this result, and there are those who suspect that Belgrade, in its eagerness to get the best out of both worlds, may one day discover that the economic net has tightened. The danger could be met by letting Yugoslavia enter the European Payments Union, but the club entrance fee—between \$50 and \$100 million—is rather high for a country in Yugoslavia's straitened

condition. Still, there is a possible solution here, and it may be that Mr. Murphy's visit to Belgrade had something to do with it.

MOVE farther south, and further evidence of the extension of Soviet influence meets the observer's eye. The Greek parliamentarian who, at the height of the Cyprus crisis, asked the government to reconsider its general orientation toward East and West did not start a landslide, but he did loosen a pebble. So did Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus when he accepted Communist support against the British "occupation" of the island, which happens to be the keystone of the NATO arch in the Eastern Mediterranean. In neither case did Moscow have to lift a finger. But it is going too far to credit the Russians with the ability to foresee all the follies of their opponents. From the Soviet viewpoint there is an embarrassing variety of possible choices, all tending to the same result, e.g. backing Greece wholeheartedly over Cyprus, or alternatively offering to promote "harmony" on the island: either policy must eventually redound to the advantage of the local Communists. But in fact this particular issue can probably be left to the joint mismanagement of London, Athens, and Ankara.

No Kremlin strategist could have foreseen, let alone planned and executed, the Istanbul riots which wrecked not merely the Greek quarter but the Greco-Turkish alliance. What happened was quite simply that Greece and Turkey (with some inept British prompting) temporarily reverted to the "normal" game of politics as traditionally played in the Balkans. That, too, was among the fruits of Geneva. After all, had not the great powers solemnly inaugurated an era of world peace, i.e. non-atomic warfare? Why then should the minor nations be forbidden to indulge their customary habits? And if Turkey, already in financial trouble and vainly trying to raise loans, has further spoiled her chance of getting the special \$300-million loan or grant demanded from the United States last spring, is it not nonetheless fairly certain that, if things become

really dangerous, Washington will step in to save its NATO partner from bankruptcy?

BUT the most spectacular result of post-Geneva "normalcy" has undoubtedly been the Egyptian government's decision to buy arms from the USSR and Czechoslovakia. Not that this announcement was entirely unexpected when it came: there had been ample hints of it for some time. Colonel Nasser was an honored guest at Bandung last April, and it was common knowledge in Cairo after his return that he had been greatly impressed by Chou En-lai. But Geneva certainly eased matters for him. If there was to be a return to the 1945 atmosphere, that is, a more or less amicable East-West competition without strident ideological overtones, then Egypt was certainly entitled to buy arms from behind the Iron Curtain, even if it meant letting Czech technicians roam about in the Suez area. Conversely, if the Western powers did not want this to happen, they must appeal to Moscow. But this meant giving the Russians a foothold in the Middle East, an area from which they had hitherto been carefully excluded. Once more the Kremlin could profit from a situation created by its opponents. The panicky reaction in Washington and London was out of proportion to Egypt's importance as such, but disclosed a keen appreciation of the extent to which the defensive "wall" around the Middle East had been breached by Colonel Nasser. In terms of traditional diplomacy, both the Russians and Egyptians were strictly within their rights, and was not the return to traditional diplomacy precisely the aim of the statesmen who conferred at Geneva last July?

Because it would have been tactless to raise the issue of Soviet penetration in the Middle East (especially after the Cairo Junta had demonstratively turned a deaf ear), official spokesmen in Washington and London fell back on the theme of the dangers arising out of the Israel-Egypt arms race. These dangers are real, for no one doubts the use to which Egypt's new equipment is eventually to be put, but they are not upper-

most in the minds of those who now make play with them. A "second round" has long been regarded as probable by American and British officials, and until quite recently this prospect did not inspire undue alarm—witness the steady sale of arms to the Arab states, unaccompanied by any attempt to convert the 1949 truce into a real peace. It is only now that real concern has been created, for now the Russians have got a foot in the door and are able to intrigue with governments hitherto regarded as immune by reason of their supposed fear of Communism.

This estimate was always a little naive where Colonel Nasser and his friends were concerned (some members of the Junta are almost certainly crypto-Communists or fellow-travelers, while the others are only divided over the kind of authoritarian semi-fascist, or semi-Kemalist—but in any case undemocratic—regime they want to establish). The same estimate is now shown to have little validity even for medieval states like Saudi Arabia, one of the few countries in the world where slaves are still publicly sold in the market place. There is no need even to mention the chaotic parliamentary regime of the Syrian Republic, or little Lebanon, whose Communist party will never "seize power," but plays the key role of intermediary among the Communist movements of the bigger Arab countries. ("The Lebanese Communists, too, have their task," as Molotov remarked to the Austrian delegates last April, when asked half-seriously what he thought would become of the small Austrian Communist party after the withdrawal of the Russian troops.)

AS FOR Israel, no one seriously supposes that its government will compromise its democratic principles, but equally no one imagines that in a situation similar to that of 1948 the Israelis will hesitate to buy arms from any quarter willing to sell: preferably from the West, if necessary from the East.*

*The State Department has already reported "indications" of the Soviet bloc's willingness to sell arms to Israel.

But the East seems to have made its choice, much to the discomfiture of Israel's sentimental left-wingers, whose political and intellectual leaders have remained true to the moth-eaten doctrines on which they were brought up. On the whole, it seems likely that Israel will continue to get its equipment from Western Europe (notably France) and perhaps from the United States. If, as some observers are beginning to think, 1956 sees a forward movement of the political tide, which has been rather sluggish since about 1950, this particular problem should not be insoluble. Even a partial comeback of the Democratic or New Deal forces in the U.S., coupled with greater influence for Mendès-France and political leaders of his tendency in Europe, should go a long way to remove Israel's threatening isolation. For this isolation is largely a function of the conservative tide which has been flowing for the past five or six years: big business and its political friends are instinctively on the side of the big battalions, or at any rate on the side of those with access to oil wells. (So far as actual battalions are concerned, the advantage is probably on Israel's side: not only qualitatively but, strange as it may seem, numerically too.)

This last-named subject is inevitably hedged about with secrecy. For some baffling reason the British government is unwilling to disclose the details of its arms supplies to Egypt, while Colonel Nasser's own statements, since the announcement of the deal with Czechoslovakia, have fallen into the more-sorry-than-angry category: but for the Western arms blockade of his regime, it appears, he would have been glad to go on acting as democracy's strong right arm in the Middle East. Yet certain facts have leaked out; *inter alia*, it has been stated by the military correspondent of the London *Times* that Egypt's total defense forces number 100,000 men, plus a "National Guard" of 50,000; whereas Israel can mobilize about 250,000 men within forty-eight hours. Since Egypt has twenty million people to Israel's million and a half (not counting her Arab minority), this comparison suggests some doubt as to

Cairo's standing in the Middle East. But sheer weight of numbers may tell in the long run, especially if the larger power can afford to "cannibalize" its equipment as fresh supplies come in from overseas. Here the support of the Eastern bloc is of real importance to the Cairo Junta, and a real source of anxiety to Western policy-makers. For if it can be plausibly represented to the Egyptian officers corps that Soviet supplies are needed to build up an adequate war reserve, the Junta need have little worry over the army's attitude to its foreign policy.

It was probably inevitable in the circumstances that the first panicky thoughts of the policy-makers in Washington and London should have turned to the crude game of outbidding the Russians; but if it is a fact that Moscow has offered Cairo two to three hundred surplus MIG planes, in addition to artillery, submarines, and other arms, one does not see what kind of Western counterstroke would have been feasible. The correct policy, as the *Times* promptly suggested, was to make it clear to the Egyptians that acceptance of Russia's offer meant cutting themselves off from the West. Sound if belated advice, but firmness in the face of dictatorial blackmail has rarely been among the habits of Western governments.

IT WOULD be pleasant were one able to conclude this catalogue of woes with some hopeful reflections on the inherent weaknesses of Soviet-Communist policy in relation to the new problems which will present themselves in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Unfortunately this kind of writing has become distinctly less easy since the replacement of the peculiar Stalinist rigidity of 1947-52 by a more flexible policy. There are observers who go so far as to speak of a genuine revival of the Soviet Communist *party* as a political force able to provide a rational direction for Soviet policy at home and abroad. Without sharing this view, one may yet note that the Communist movement has to some extent managed to get out of the tactical straitjacket imposed upon it during Stalin's

last years, although this revival is **more** marked in Asia than in Europe. To the extent that it has taken place, it is becoming easier for Communist parties to make use of the opportunities created for them by the USSR's growing weight on the international scene.

The revival of the Communist movement has certainly not been halted since Geneva. On the contrary. It is reflected in the self-confidence exuded by the Khrushchev-Bulganin team on the increasingly numerous occasions where Western delegates are able to buttonhole the new rulers; and it will probably find dramatic expression at the party congress next February, to which observers from all countries are likely to receive invitations. There is at the moment a certain tendency in the West, notably in the United States, to describe this aggressive self-confidence as being somehow contrary to the "Geneva spirit." Perhaps it is, if by the Geneva spirit one

means the kind of hopeful publicity about peace and prosperity that became the fashion last summer. But in fairness to the Russians, it must be recorded that they understood Geneva to signify the West's tacit recognition of the fact that the Sino-Soviet bloc cannot be compelled to renounce any of its conquests.

If this interpretation is correct, the real question is not whether the Kremlin has been misbehaving itself since Geneva, but what the Western powers propose to do in order to cope with the inevitable growth of Communist influence which is a direct consequence of Geneva. But perhaps that question, too, is merely a piece of rhetoric. There are limits to what governments can do, even if they are abler, more intelligent, and less conventionally minded than those we have lately been getting. The real issue perhaps is whether there are political forces outside the present official framework that could give fresh direction to Western policy.